

OPPOSITIONAL LOYALTY AND CONSUMER IDENTITY: BRAND COMMUNITIES AND GAMING

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Abstract

The growth of online brand communities have increasingly allowed consumers to connect and share their consumption experiences of products and services with one another, particularly in such fields as video gaming. Such communities have become valuable topics of contemporary research for marketers within the field of consumer culture theory. Within such environments, the phenomena of oppositional loyalty and subcultural capital are increasingly relevant with regards to understanding the consumer brand loyalty. Oppositional loyalty occurs when a consumer selectively filters information regarding certain brands and products, strengthening existing positive sentiments towards preferred brands while affirming perceived negative traits of rivals.

This research seeks to understand how oppositional loyalty influences the behavior and consumption practices of members of online communities with overlapping brand presence. Oppositional loyalty is examined within the context of the GameSpot online video gaming brand community, where multiple brand loyalties are exhibited. The manner in which community members discuss rival brands and share their consumption practices within the online environment is a key area of focus. In addition, this research looks at the role of sharing and expression of consumption experiences in the identity creation of an online community member.

A netnography is used as the method of research, where ethnographic practices are applied to an online community environment. The brand community, its members and cultural practices are observed and discourse elements are analyzed. A total of 38 separate online discussions from the GameSpot community are analyzed.

This research finds oppositional loyalty as a possible contributor to community-wide tensions with regards to brand discussions and comparisons. Oppositional loyalty is seen as an influencer of and ultimately as a shaper of brand community culture where multiple rival brands are present.

This research contributes to existing research by showing that oppositional loyalty may have an influence on brand community structure and culture through brand preferences and discussions. Additionally, this research provides insight into how consumers perform identity work within an online brand community.

Keywords Oppositional loyalty, brand community, identity

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1. Introduction

The growth of internet communities have increasingly allowed consumers to connect and share their consumption experiences of products and services with one another. Such communities have become valuable topics of contemporary research for marketers within the field of consumer culture theory (Kozinets, 2002; Weijo, Hietanen, and Mattila, 2014; Muniz and Schau, 2005). Given the increasingly competitive nature of some contemporary industries, such as the online video gaming industry, online communities are also accommodating consumers with multiple brand interests and overlapping brand loyalties. As brand loyalties and consumption practices are routinely mediated by the culture and social structure of each community, members of such online cultural environments may find themselves introduced or exposed to multiple competing brands on a regular basis. Within such environments, the phenomena of oppositional loyalty (Thompson & Sinha, 2008) and subcultural capital are increasingly relevant with regards to understanding the relationship between consumer brand loyalty and social community hierarchy.

Existing research has examined the nature of online brand communities, and the roles culture and discourse both play in the development of story structures within these consumer environments. The literature has provided a foundation for marketers to understand the value of such communities in developing and comprehending the consumption experiences and brand image from consumers themselves. Prior research (Muniz & Hamer, 2001; Thompson & Sinha, 2008) has looked at oppositional loyalty and subcultural capital each in the context of online brand communities, but the issue of how consumers possessing variable subcultural capital and social identification make sense of each other's experiences with multiple competing brands remains open to further study.

In understanding the dynamic between oppositional loyalty, identity development and subcultural capital as potentially connected cultural mediators, marketers may be able to more effectively understand consumer brand loyalty patterns. Identifying the antecedents and catalysts for brand switching and competing product adoption by members within a multi-brand community may help online marketers in managing and analyzing brand communities.

This paper examines these issues within the context of online gaming communities through a netnographic study. An online forum with an active user base of several thousand and multiple brand inclusions forms the focus of the ethnographic examination. The forms of discourse and expression of

consumption activities by the members of the chosen online forum are looked at in detail. This study hopes to shed light on the ways in which oppositional loyalty and subcultural capital might together shape a brand community's cultural development, as well as story structures, within an online environment. The ways in which community members conduct identity work through sharing their consumption experiences and brand related discourse are an additional area of study. Online gaming brand communities are considered to be an appropriate theatre for examining the relationships between oppositional loyalty and subcultural capital among members of multiple overlapping brand communities. With all of the above in mind, the main purpose of this study is to tackle the question of how members of such communities share their consumption experiences with each other, including how consumers discuss their own consumption experiences, as well as those of other community members.

1.1 Research Question

Specifically, this paper examines the following primary research question:

“How does oppositional loyalty structure or influence the behavior and consumption practices of members of overlapping online communities?”

In addition, the following secondary research question is considered:

“What role does the sharing and expression of consumption experiences play in a consumer's identity creation within an online community?”

1.2 Outline of the study

The rest of this thesis is organized as follows. First the theoretical background and literature are presented in chapter 2, in order to set an appropriate frame of reference for this research. The relevant theoretical literature on consumer culture theory and identity work are introduced, as well as that of oppositional loyalty. Literature on brand communities and subcultural capital are also presented, and their importance to this study are discussed.

The GameSpot online brand community is introduced in chapter 3, and its relevance to the study is explained and applicability as a brand community for study is described.

The methodology is then discussed in chapter 4, including the forms of data collection used. The use of discourse analysis in the study is presented.

Chapter 5 discusses the methods of the data analysis. Ethnography and netnography are described as the methods used in this study. Discourse analysis, as well as information on the data collection and coding methods are also discussed.

In chapter 6, the findings are presented in detail and analyzed. The findings from the community analysis are organized according to the themes that have been interpreted from the raw data.

Chapter 7 discusses the key findings and outcomes of this study, and how they relate to existing research and literature. The major outcomes are presented and positioned to tackle the research questions.

Chapter 8 presents the conclusion of this thesis, including both theoretical and managerial implications. Research limitations and suggestions for conducting future research are also offered.

1.3 Key terminology

Below is an outline of some terms that are regularly used and referred to throughout this study, and their specific meaning within this research. These terms are mostly related to online communities, and are referenced mostly in the analysis and discussion portion of this thesis. Concepts that are more closely related to the theoretical background of this research are defined and discussed in more depth in the following chapters.

Community member – an individual consumer that has entered the brand community in question and is acting within the community environment, forming relationships with other consumers in the community and participating in the development of the community culture while learning the principles and values of that culture. In this research paper community members refer to consumers that are part of the GameSpot brand community.

Forum – an online website where hundreds or even thousands of individuals can discuss various topics by posting comments which are visible to all forum users. Such websites (or pages on websites) are also sometimes called “boards” or “bulletin boards” due to the distinct layout.

Sub-forum – a smaller or more focused forum within or part of a larger parent forum, for individuals to discuss more specific topics than in the parent forum. Large online forums may often be made up of several sub-forums each focused on a particular topic, or type of discussion that is of interest to the forum’s community. The specific forums and sub-forums examined in this thesis are discussed later.

Thread – a group of linked messages on a specific topic, created by community members on an online forum. Some threads are known as “stickied” – these have been deemed particularly important or informative (such as public service announcements, information on the rules and etiquette of the forum, or discussions affecting the forum in its entirety), and have therefore been made permanently visible on that forum’s first page by moderators.

Post – a single message created (or “posted”) by a forum member, as part of a thread.

Moderator – a member of an online forum brand community with special privileges regarding control of the forum’s activity and related responsibilities, such as communicating the forum’s etiquette, announcing forum-related news, answering questions, removing posts or threads deemed inappropriate or in violation of the community’s forum etiquette. Moderators are often forum members that have proven their understanding of the community’s culture and values through being active members themselves, though this isn’t always the case.

2. Literature Review

The following section presents in detail this study's theoretical foundations and associated existing literature.

2.1 Consumer culture theory

The study forms its basis in consumer culture theory (CCT), referring to the theoretical knowledge and research of consumption and marketplace behaviors (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). At its most fundamental, CCT aims to study the relationships and actions of consumers within marketplaces, identifying cultural meaning within these processes and the environment contexts within which they occur. As mentioned by Geertz (1973), researchers of CCT seek to develop new theoretical insights by studying consumption contexts. Researchers of CCT also emphasize that CCT is a collection of linked theoretical perspectives, as opposed to a well-defined theory. Fundamentally, CCT sees culture as the collected experiences, actions, and meanings that consumers use to make sense of their lives within their environments (Kozinets, 2001). As explained by many, consumer culture may be witnessed in interconnected marketplaces on a global level, with local cultures being influenced by global media and eventually incorporating new cultural elements, and becoming increasingly interweaved with other cultures (Appadurai, 1990; Slater, 1997; Wilk, 1995).

As Arnould and Thompson (2005) propose, culture facilitates the identity development and expression of the consumer. The culture, ideologies and symbolism of a marketplace influence the thoughts and actions of the consumer (Askegaard and Kjeldgaard, 2002; Holt, 1997). Consumption experiences are therefore ultimately a means for consumers to create and shape their lives; the realities of many consumers are unfixed, nonsingular and highly dependent on that individual's actions and fantasies. In this way, culture can be seen as morphing and shifting over time; an aspect of daily life that is assimilated, altered, and then transferred between culturally connected consumers (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006, p. 9).

Over the past twenty years, research on CCT has built a reservoir of theoretical knowledge on cultural aspects inherent in various types of consumer marketplaces. The online environment is one such marketplace that has received increasing attention from researchers while growing in relevance.

The increased importance of understanding CCT as it pertains to the internet environment is clear given the rapid growth of online consumer marketplaces in recent years. This shift of consumer communities from the real world to the online world necessitates specific CCT study if marketers are to understand how consumer culture is mediated and influenced by virtual environments. While an increasing amount of marketing research has been conducted on examining culture in online consumer marketplaces, a greater amount can serve to further improve modern understandings of CCT.

2.2 Consumer identity work

Consumers also take part in activities to visualize and then construct their own personal identity based on their own ideologies and wants. This is known as identity work (Snow and Anderson, 1987). At its core, identity work can be seen as a process centered on balancing personal identity with the social identity that is presented to the world (Kreiner, Hollensbe and Sheep, 2006). The dynamic between the internal versus the external identities is in constant regulation, with an individual's identities of self gradually changing over time. Indeed Svenigsson and Alvesson (2003, p. 1165) note that identity work involves *"forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of coherence and distinctiveness."* Individuals engage in identity work when faced with situations that challenge their sense of self (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008), and identity work can be seen as a method with which to better understand oneself over time through tackling existential questions (Svenigsson and Alvesson, 2003; Alvesson, Ashcraft and Thomas, 2008). One example of consumer identity work in action may be in online forums and communities, where consumers might engage in building their sense of self in response to the specific experiences, social roles and relationships that take place within that particular environment. Indeed Schau (2002) discuss consumer identity work occurring in online environments, particularly within brand communities, and tensions between the individual's own identity and brand community membership are identified.

Identities themselves can also be seen as having different aspects. According to Snow and Anderson (1987), personal identities refer to meanings given by the individual to themselves, while social identities in contrast refer to the identities given to others by an individual, as a way of more easily visualizing those others as "social objects". This multiplicity of identity is also visible in the ways that identity work manifests, as well as its uses and functions. Identity work is also not just a conscious

process, but unconscious as well (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). It is less conscious during more stable life situations, while being more conscious during periods of higher stress and activity and in general on a day to day basis. Inconsistent and more hectic life situations require more identity work, and such work is likely to be more directed and goal oriented during major life events (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008).

2.3.1 Identity work process and tactics

While the ultimate aim of identity work is the creation and maintenance of a fulfilling sense of self (Snow and Anderson, 1987), it is not always a positive process, as noted by some (Alvesson, 2010; Svenigsson and Alvesson, 2003). In fact, identity work may not always even succeed. Attempts at identity work can lead to an individual unable to successfully develop a more coherent sense of self identity (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008). Some individuals do not even attempt in a consistent manner to develop an improved sense of self through identity work (Snow and Anderson, 1987). The process of identity work may also be mentally demanding depending on the level of stress and difficulty of maintaining a feeling of continuity with the sense of self. The avoidance of situations deemed too stressful to the individual's identity is one of the drivers of identity work. Such situations may rise from various insecurities, be they social, psychological, or related to economic stress (Collinson, 2003).

Ashfort and Mael (1989) mention the use of many so called identity work tactics an individual may utilize in fostering, managing, and advancing the process of identity work. It should be noted that identity work itself can manifest in a number of forms, while also evolving over time. This constant shifting and gradual development has been noted by researchers (Kreiner, Hollensbe and Sheep, 2006; Thomas and Linstead, (2002). One reason for this is due to personal and social contexts themselves changing naturally over time, for example due to social, organizational or occupational happenings (Kreiner, Hollensbe and Sheep, 2006). These sorts of changes can be simply due to the dynamic nature of social environments, as pointed out by Alvesson, Ashcraft and Thomas (2008). According to Beech (2008), aspects of narrative style as well as cognitive effects and power dynamics can all also function as influencers, with identities themselves are made up of combinations of different meanings. Individuals may also conduct identity work in different ways, supporting the activity by for example utilizing physical objects or settings, changing personal appearance, associating with specific persons, and using verbal means such as language (Snow and Anderson, 1987).

The use of language points to identity work being by its very nature discursive, as noted by Brown and Humphreys (2006). This basis of personal discourse can lead to the development of different forms of identity, which may compete and lead to the gradual changing of identity as mentioned (Alvesson, Ashcraft and Thomas, 2008; Toyoki and Brown, 2014). This competition may in fact lead to the individual developing different and even contrasting discursive positions regarding their identity (Clarke, Brown and Hailey, 2009), which can lead to the identity work itself becoming a challenge (Svenigsson and Alvesson, 2003).

Snow and Anderson (1987) discuss identity work tactics like story-telling, distancing, and embracement. In distancing, an individual attempts to distance themselves from the roles and associations that they feel are against their own concepts of self. Consumers may attempt to distance themselves from brands that they perceive to be in some way negative or that may damage the individual's social identity. Role distancing refers to rejecting connections to roles that might display a type or style of virtual self that is unwanted by the individual (Snow and Anderson, 1987). Embracement in contrast refers to an individual conforming to a social role or ideology, affirming its connection with their own identity of self. In this way the individual utilizes the proposed role, relationship or ideology as an element that helps shape and construct their identity.

2.4 Brand communities

Brand communities have been established as valuable marketing assets, especially with regards to building and maintaining brand loyalty among consumers (McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig, 2002). A brand community has been defined as *"a specialized, non-geographically bound community, based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand."* (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001, p. 412) They can be seen as a series of connected relationships involving the consumer, the brand and other consumers. They both encourage and allow consumers to organize, as well as further develop consumption experiences and brand-related identity creation. Cultural meaning, consumption activities, and consumption specific symbolism may also form as consumer relationships develop within these communities. This may strengthen the loyalty of consumers within a given community towards a particular brand, ultimately leading to perhaps higher rates of adoption behavior and product and service consumption. Research exists that shows brand communities may influence a consumer's buying behavior through word of mouth, new brand and product information, and social identity development

that occurs in community membership (Algesheimer, Dholakia, and Herrmann, 2005; Gatignon and Robertson, 1985; Thompson and Sinha, 2008).

As consumers and marketers build and shape these communities, the specific nature of the marketplace environment, and in turn the structure of the community itself, can vary widely. Though brand communities are often defined as not being geographically limited, it has been noted that a community can be specifically concentrated or dispersed, from a geographic perspective (Holt, 1995; McAlexander, Schouten, and Koenig, 2002). Furthermore, brand communities can be partly or even wholly nonphysical, manifesting in internet areas (Kozinets, 1997).

The online environment is in fact becoming increasingly popular among consumers wishing to not only learn more about branded products, but also communicate with other like-minded and inquisitive consumers (Kozinets, 2002). Earlier research identified consumer communities on websites, newsgroups and other nonphysical electronic environments as “virtual communities” (Rheingold, 1993). Such communities are widely considered to be just as real and influential to consumer behavior and loyalty development as more traditional “physical” groups (Jones, 1995; Kozinets, 1997; Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). As noted by some (Weijo, Hietanen, and Mattila, 2014; Thornton, 1996), defining the structure of particular online communities can be problematic when attempted through more traditionally perceived barometers, like subcultural capital. This is largely due to the oftentimes nonlinear and fractured nature of the social hierarchies of such communities.

In comparison to physical communities, the accessible and nonphysical nature of online communities (particularly online forums and boards) allows for new members to more easily become exposed to them and join them. This has led to online brand communities becoming more delocalized, incorporating members with ties to more than one brand, sometimes even competing brands. This factor serves to emphasize permeability and ease of entry that characterizes brand communities (see Muniz and O’Guinn, 2001). This ease of entry, requiring not much more than brand knowledge and on occasion some sort of online subscription/registration, can lead to consumers being members of multiple online brand communities.

2.5 Subcultural capital

The social structures of brand communities have traditionally been viewed as a highly linear process, where new members progress from so called “visitors” to “insiders” within a consumption community. This process involves the gradual learning of the cultural myths, practices and workings of the community in question, with the new member building social status and so called subcultural capital through activities that jive with the culture of the community (Kozinets, 2002; Thornton, 1996). Subcultural capital is seen by some as a status-based resource (Arsel and Thompson, 2011) that is inherently specific to the nature and context of the social structure of the community. Arsel and Thompson (2011) further note that subcultural capital is often most strongly linked to a key consumption activity within a community, acting as the lynchpin brand or pastime which ties the community together. Subcultural capital is therefore also seen by some as at least an indirect driver of status competition within brand communities (Cova and Pace, 2006).

However, online communities have somewhat altered the way in which subcultural capital is seen as developing. Due to the simultaneously more fractured and interconnected nature of online communities, understanding the role that subcultural capital and specific consumption practices play in such community structures and their development is harder (Weijo, Hietanen, and Mattila, 2014; Kozinets, 2010). Researchers such as Weijo, Hietanen and Mattila (2004) emphasize the need to be more mindful and attentive regarding the true extent of subcultural capital as a major influencer of structure within online communities. This may be particularly important when attempting to precisely determine the consumption interests of such communities, as has been a topic in some existing research (Arsel and Thompson, 20011; Kozinets, 2007; Thomas, Price and Schau, 2013).

2.6 Oppositional loyalty

Prior research has noted the role of brand communities in hindering brand switching while strengthening existing loyalty in consumers (Thompson and Sinha, 2008; Muniz and Hamer, 2001). Community involvement has been shown to directly influence consumer buying behavior via word of mouth (Algesheimer, Dholakia, and Herrmann, 2005). Muniz and O’Guinn (2001) note how consumers often prefer to discuss the virtues and uses of preferred brands, while simultaneously shunning similar discussion of rival brands. Such consumers instead prefer to focus on the positive aspects of their

already favored brands, and further take note of faults within rival brands or products. This leads to oppositional loyalty, where a consumer selectively filters information regarding certain brands and products, strengthening existing positive sentiments towards preferred brands while affirming perceived negative traits of rivals (Thompson and Sinha, 2008; Muniz and Hamer, 2001). This process may result in members of a community being exposed to less information on the possible virtues of new products from competitors.

Research on oppositional loyalty is closely linked to that of brand communities. A key aspect of the relationship between oppositional loyalty and brand communities is the ability of individuals within a community to influence and change the brand loyalties of other members through the exposure of selective brand information (Thompson and Sinha, 2008). The more an individual participates in a particular brand community, the more likely they are to receive positive information about a brand they prefer, as well as generate increased knowledge about that brand overall, which can potentially lead to adopting more of that brand's products (Thompson and Sinha, 2008; Rogers, 2003). In practice, the other members of a community influence an individual's brand perception and adoption.

Thompson and Sinha (2008) explore the limits and characteristics of oppositional loyalty. Of note is the finding that higher levels of brand community participation may in fact increase the likelihood that an individual will adopt products from a competing brand. More specifically, where online brand community membership overlaps across multiple brands, consumers that are members of one brand's community may be more likely to adopt new products from a rival brand. This element of oppositional loyalty goes against conventionally held ideas of brand loyalty and its relationship with brand communities. As oppositional loyalty is a somewhat newly studied phenomenon within marketing theory, there is arguably room for further research concerning the phenomenon of oppositional loyalty within online environments.

3. Introduction to the GameSpot online community

The chosen online community for this study is a website known as GameSpot, launched in 1998. The website provides video gaming news, reviews, downloads and other video gaming related information. GameSpot also includes an active forum community. GameSpot users can post on the forums, of which there are many sub categories, including general gaming, specific game and brand forums, console and PC forums, etc. In total there are sixteen sub-forums on the GameSpot online community website. The website clearly strives to cater to a wide range of gamers, and provide an extensive platform for members to discuss specific areas of interest in the gaming industry.

What is clearly apparent is the at least implicit community-wide understanding towards the importance of developing a personal identity as a gamer; the upholding of the individual as someone who experiences gaming in his or her own way, and explores the medium in all its myriad forms. This is evident when examining all of the community features available to the average user. Members can write their own reviews and blogs, manage lists of games they have played, upload personal images, and post on other member profiles. All of this illustrates the multiple ways that the community's members can share and express their video gaming brand and consumption interests with each other. The personal blog, reviews and forum posts are all connected together and visible from the user's own public profile, which may encourage and simplify members' online identity work.

GameSpot's community forums also appear to be a place that values the development of subcultural capital among its members. The forum's user interface features a side pane ranking the "Top Posters"; community members with the most accumulated forum posts. This makes it incredibly easy for anyone in the community (as well as those outside of it) to follow particularly those members with an extensive post history, which may also lead to community members being more aware of the image of themselves that they present within the online community.

Additionally, community members can achieve different "emblems", which are achievements awarded according to the user's community activity (such as voting in different website events, like the GameSpot annual Readers' Choice Awards). One particularly relevant achievement is that of the "Game Expert", which, it is made clear, is possessed by those members who have demonstrated their gaming experience and are even recommended as individuals who can provide game-related advice. Such

features further highlight GameSpot's support of building a community and culture were the building of subcultural capital and legitimacy as a consumer is rewarded, and something to take pride in.

4. Methodology

As it draws on consumer culture theory and ethnographic research, this study is qualitative. The research conducted examines the context-specific use of human discourse from a cultural perspective, instead of relying on numerical information (Bellenger, Bernhardt and Goldstucker, 1976). The research focuses on deriving meaning from context-specific human thoughts and actions, and the philosophical and methodological stances and assumptions are positioned with that focus in mind.

4.1 Research philosophy

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), a research paradigm may be defined as a set of fundamental understandings and thoughts of the reality we live in, including a researcher's own thoughts, beliefs and relationship to reality as a whole, as well as the various means of gleaning such knowledge and ultimately its use in life. Essentially, it encompasses the way of viewing and thinking about the world the individual lives in.

This thesis in particular is positioned within interpretive research under the constructivist research paradigm, which aligns with the qualitative nature of the thesis (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). The constructivist paradigm sees reality as being multiple, and as being constructed both through society and in the mind. Multiple realities therefore exist by way of each person perceiving the world in their own manner. The framing of this thesis under such a paradigm is fitting for this thesis due to the emphasis on brand community member discourses and identity work, as well as community culture.

4.2 Ontology

Ontology studies the nature of reality and how it is viewed (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Ontology deals with the nature of reality and tries to answer questions related to how elements of being should be classified. The constructivist paradigm as mentioned above, sees that reality is socially constructed and multitudinous, and that reality is also a human construct influenced heavily by social activity (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). Reality is therefore seen as being constructed by the individual, through interactions with the world and environment.

The nature of multiple realities is echoed throughout the theoretical background relevant to this research. The assumption of multiple realities exists in consumer culture theory, with the life of a consumer itself having different realities depending on contextual, cultural and environmental factors (Arnould and Thompson, 2005). Similarly, identity work discusses an individual's identity having multiple parts and aspects that are mentally developed (Toyoki and Brown, 2014). Identity work is used by the individual to develop meaning from interacting with the world, particularly social interactions, and a view of reality is constructed based on context as well as language (Beech, 2008; Wetherell, Taylor and Yates, 2010).

4.3 Epistemology

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), epistemology studies the nature of knowledge, including the relationship between the individual and the known. Epistemology is based on ontological perspectives. Knowledge is seen as created through interaction between the researcher and the topic of study, in accordance with constructivism (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988).

Knowledge and identities can be considered subjective in nature, and the identity development that occurs through knowledge creation can be seen as a process that changes over time (Thomas and Lindstead, 2002; Svenigsson and Alvesson, 2003). As part of its subjectivity, knowledge is considered highly context specific, and any understanding that is gleaned through research is only one form of understanding, and not an ultimate or final form of understanding (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988).

4.4 Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is the theory and methodology regarding interpretation, particularly that of linguistics and discourse (Arnold and Fischer, 1994). According to Hudson and Ozanne (1988), hermeneutics can be seen as an important part of the process of developing understanding, and this process is ongoing and potentially without end.

When it comes to the analytical interpretation of research material, this thesis follows the hermeneutics of suspicion, which stands with the hermeneutics of faith as being one of the two types of approaches towards knowledge interpretation in hermeneutics (Josselson, 2004). Hermeneutics utilizes the concept of “pre-understanding”, which refers to the context-specific foundation of meanings and understandings inherent in linguistics (Arnold and Fischer, 1994). Additionally, the “hermeneutic circle” is classified as the process of deriving meaning and making sense of a body of text through the analysis of individual parts of that text (Moisander and Valtonen, 2006). These perspectives on context and linguistics being influential in understanding research are relevant and important to this thesis, given the heavy focus on language use and discourse.

5. Methods

This section of the paper explains the methods used for data collection and analysis. In addition, practicalities behind the GameSpot community as a data collection environment are detailed.

5.1 Ethnography & Netnography

This paper draws on ethnography as a form of qualitative research. Ethnography is primarily involved with observing the activities of a social group, with findings developed from the researcher's own interpretations of this fieldwork process (Moisander and Valtonen, 2006). As explained by Kozinets (2002), ethnography is sometimes used to generalize findings but is more often used to develop a detailed and specific understanding of the cultural factors of a group. Glaser and Strauss (1967) has made note of this being called "grounded knowledge". The nature of ethnography makes it an open-ended and flexible research method, allowing it to be used in different fields and contexts. According to Arnould and Wallendorf (1994), ethnography is one of the most popular qualitative research methods used.

Netnography is the primary form of research in this study, and is the study of people and cultures in an online context. It can be considered a variety or subtype of ethnography; indeed Kozinets (2002) describes netnography as "ethnography adapted to the study of online communities". In netnography, a researcher identifies a relevant online community and gathers transcripts/quotes from community members. The researcher should also make notes based on their own observations and interpretations of discussion. Through the data collection and analysis process the researcher organizes and categorizes their notes and quotes according to major relevant themes and patterns. Depending on the context, netnography can be a faster and simpler research method than traditional ethnography. Netnography has gained popularity in social sciences, consumer research, as well as other related fields. It is a particularly unobtrusive method of study and allows the researcher to observe communities and the cultures therein without potentially "contaminating" the community environment with their presence and getting a false or misleading perspective of the chosen consumption community.

There are some key differences between netnography and ethnography, a major one being research ethics (Kozinets, 2002). There exists debate regarding whether open online communities can

be considered public, and what the specifics behind informed consent are in such environments. Researchers using netnography should nevertheless demonstrate transparency by disclosing their research activities to the community being studied, keep the identities of informants anonymous, and be open to feedback from the observed community. One way of incorporating feedback and transparency in an ethical way is through member checks, which involve presenting final research findings to those community members that have been quoted or closely examined, in order to get their input (Kozinets, 2002; Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

There are other important points that differentiate netnography from ethnography. Kozinets (2002) emphasizes that only the anonymous text-based communication of members within a community are observed in netnography, and more personal or subtle information (such as) that would be available for study in traditional ethnography is left out. This factor may lead to the accuracy and trustworthiness of community identities being called into question, or at least requiring more scrutiny from the researcher. The fluid and easily shifting nature of online environments may make judging genuine community member identities more challenging (Turkle, 1995). Some researchers also point out that consumers may not present their true or actual self in online environment (Hollenbeck and Kaikati, 2012). What is important in the end is that the netnography researcher identify the limitations of this chosen medium, and develop research conclusions that take these limitations into consideration (Kozinets, 2002).

Netnography has its limitations, with a key one being the difficulty in generalizing research findings of a specific online community to others or to an entire industry or marketplace. This is due to the highly focused and contextual nature of netnography. Another weakness that it shares with more traditional ethnography is the need for strong interpretive skills; the researcher conducting a netnography must be able to make sense of the metaphorical use of language, particularly that of pure textual dialogue (Kozinets, 2002). This can lead to netnography being a more skill intensive research method, with success and usefulness of results more dependent on the researcher's own abilities than in some other research methods.

5.2 Discourse analysis

Discourse analysis has been used as a tool in various disciplines and areas of research, including psychology and sociology. It can be considered more of a broader term for a style of research approach that examines languages, as opposed to a single given technique or specific method. Discourse analysis is the study of dialogues and text with the aim of identifying broader meanings behind language, including how that language may be used to convey an individual's views of the world and reality (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Individuals utilize language as a context-specific resource within goal-oriented communication, choosing specific linguistic elements for self-expression.

For netnographic research, discourse analysis can be a useful method due to the nature of what is being studied. As online communities are often essentially text-based, studying the contextual use of language within such communities can provide a unique perspective in understanding the culture and meanings of a given group of consumers. Given that discourse analysis attempts to determine how language can express an individual's view of the world (Potter and Wetherell, 1987), its use as a research method can help a netnographer gain insight into how a community sees a brand or consumption activity.

5.3 Coding

Simplistic a-priori coding was used in this research to help organize and categorize thematic patterns and trends in the community's discussions that were deemed relevant and illuminating. Creswell (2009, p186) defines coding as "taking text data or pictures gathered during data collection, segmentation sentences (or paragraphs) or images into categories, and labeling those categories with a term". It should be noted that coding is widely considered a time consuming and difficult process (Creswell, 2009; Miles and Huberman, 1994), with Miles and Huberman (1994) going so far as to call it "hard, obsessive work". What is also interesting to note is that while coding can be a useful tool in netnography, it may in fact lead to the researcher placing an arguably excessive emphasis on precise and literal classification, as opposed to emphasizing contextual metaphor and symbolism of text and dialogue, potentially leading to less insightful research conclusions (Kozinets, 2002; Levy, 1959; Thompson 1997; Van Maanen, 1988).

For the reasons mentioned above, hand-coding was used throughout this research only as a minor supplemental tool, and was conducted without any specific coding software. Another reason that coding was kept very rudimentary was due to the researcher's own inexperience in its usage and application. Coded terms were therefore kept relatively few and served to categorize general key themes and keep notes organized.

5.4 Data collection

A total of 38 threads on the GameSpot community forums were studied and saved. The majority of these were from the "Games Discussion" and "System Wars" sub-forums. Other threads from the "Retro Gaming", "Xbox Association" and "PC/Mac/Linux Society" forums were also examined. Attention was given to those threads that appeared highly relevant to this research. This generally meant longer threads with informative discussion regarding consumption experiences and brand loyalty by members who appeared to possess varying levels of subcultural capital, community activity and community age. Discussions and posts that were considered off topic, lacking in insightful commentary, or otherwise useless were not analyzed. Similarly, messages that seemed to contain elements of advertising, spam or otherwise deemed not genuine were also left aside.

6. Findings and Analysis

In this section, the findings of the data collection are presented and analyzed. Themes in brand community culture and oppositional loyalty were identified through studying the discourse, sharing of experiences and cultural meanings within the community. The key focus of the data collection and analysis process was on examining how the community members shared brand consumption experiences, and how this was influenced and mediated by the subcultural capital of members within the community, as well as other members' own brand tastes.

Through the analysis process, three major themes emerged from the data. The three major themes include: 1) consumer identity work regarding what it means to be a gamer and member of an online gaming community; 2) the attempts by consumers to influence other members' brand loyalties; and 3) rising social tensions within the community as a result of the different resident brand supporters. Before examining these major themes in detail, a general overview of discourse and the sharing of consumption experiences within the GameSpot online community is presented, serving to set the stage for the rest of the analysis. This overview includes the sharing of consumption experiences by consumers, done both implicitly and explicitly, as well as the language used when doing so.

6.1 Sharing consumption experiences

Community members actively shared and described their own consumption experiences in detail with each other, across multiple sub-forums. Consumption experiences shared in this way often took the form of likes and dislikes, concerns towards an owned brand or product, or the future of a developing brand. Many discussions were also explicit invitations for other members to share their own consumption experiences and tastes, such as threads with titles like "Do you always play games on the hardest setting?" Such discussions allowed for both intricate and brief inputs by other members. Discussions of this type usually started with a question posed by a member to the community in general, relating their own consumption experience and asking to hear the experiences of others. Some discussions were rants or posts where a member expressed their dislike, frustration or enjoyment of a brand/product, or a more specific aspect of their consumption experience (e.g. an aspect/mechanic of a game). Discussions on correctly defining the consumption experience of a brand/product were also commonplace. Some members had a very strong impression of what the consumption of a product was

like, or what it should be like. Disliked brands, products or product categories (such as genres of games) were referred to in somewhat humorous and even derogatory ways (e.g. calling certain branded first person shooter games “mindless bro shooters”). The transplanted comments below are two examples of the different ways in which community members shared and described their personal consumption experiences.

“Yea, that segment was very intense. Caught me totally off-guard too. I fist pumped and hollered at the end. I'm finding a huge part of the accomplishment comes because the controls are so precise that it feels like everything is on the player.”

– MirkkoS77, in reply to another member’s comment, posted in thread “The Awesomeness of Ori and the Blind Forest”, posted on 17/03/2015

“(...) biggest frustration of the year - batman. some parts were awesome and truly impressive but all overshadowed ultimately by needlessly excessive batmobile usage in missions. at first i thought it's not too bad people are blowing it out of proportion, near the end i was like dear god make it stop. such a shame.”

– Macutchi, in reply to another member’s comment, posted in thread “Gamers, what was your awesome/worst games of 2015?”, posted on 12/16/2015

In the above comments, the community members describe their consumption experiences according to the emotional reactions they felt during gameplay, particularly in comparison to their consumption expectations. Forum members mentioned specific moments of gameplay that made a game feel authentic, emotionally engaging, and/or highly experiential. Describing emotions felt during the consumption experience was in fact highly common, as well as the individual’s own methods or style of partaking in video gaming consumption. Users often identified precisely the aspects that contributed to a pleasant and satisfying consumption experience, or those that detracted from it. As seen in MirkkoS77’s comment, the specific mention of how a game’s controls impacted his or her experience may be one way of the user communicating, conscious or not, his or her knowledge of gaming as a consumption experience. The user’s praise of specific elements of the consumption experience and the resulting sense of accomplishment is an implicit communication of the individual’s identity as a consumer to the rest of the community, as well as a possible invitation to identify with other community members with a similar consumer identity.

“After work I rarely feel like playing games. And if I force myself to I don't appreciate it as much. Even on Saturday after a long hard week my mental energy can be down.

Right now I don't really feel like playing games.

I feel like maybe something a little less mentally strenuous like maybe watch movies or listening to music.”

– thereal25, first post of thread “Games and mental energy”, posted on 05/08/2015

While often the descriptions of consumption experiences were in response to community-wide questions (as is clear from the forum thread titles in the previously transplanted comments), this was not always the case. In some cases, as in the quote directly above, comments or threads were made simply as statements or descriptions of consumption experiences with no inherent question posed to the community or requests for other member opinions. In such cases the community forums seemed to serve as a platform for personal venting or even diary-like behavior, with even an implicit expectation of hearing the community's advice or otherwise generating discussion. Such threads tended to attract notes of agreement from other members that apparently felt the same way. In such cases, comments of disagreement or disbelief were less common, and community members appeared interested in supporting of those members expressing disappointment or frustration through their consumption experience descriptions. In this way community members appeared to show their desire to connect with and support each other over the less positive aspects of, or difficulties with, the consumption experience.

Some members also to a degree deliberately fostered discussion and forum activity specifically regarding the community's overall culture and atmosphere. In these cases there was a more direct attempt to encourage other community members to share their consumption activities, and not just about gaming. This did not really seem to target specific members but rather acted as a way of keeping the sharing of consumption practices a normal and frequent part of discussion. This pointed to the existence of a specific concept among particularly long-term members of what healthy discussion in the GameSpot community meant to them, and potentially on a broader cultural level within the website's community. An example of this sort of activity can be seen by community member and moderator Branketra in the quote below.

“Welcome, Games Discussion regulars and newcomers to the Lounge. Here you can talk about gaming or science and technology, film, etc. Anything you would like to talk about is not off-topic as long as it is suitable for all ages. Feel free to comment about the latest news that interests

you. GameSpot has a diverse community, so you might be pleasantly surprised to find someone who shares your enthusiasm about what you bring to this forum.

Relax and enjoy.”

– BranKetra, GameSpot Moderator, posted on thread ‘Games Discussion Lounge’, posted on 15/04/2015

The quote above highlights a community member’s implicit sharing of their ideals regarding the culture and experiential atmosphere of the community, including language use and manor of presentation. Of relevance in this comment quote is long time member BranKetra’s status as a community moderator, and his or her higher level of subcultural capital and reach within the community as a result. As a more senior and more directly visible member of the GameSpot community due to their moderatorship and posting activity, BranKetra encourages other community members to discuss their product consumption, their tastes outside of gaming, and ultimately what branded products they might recommend to each other. In this way community discussion was additionally encouraged to reach areas and topics outside of, but ultimately related to, branded video game products.

6.2 Theme One: The identity of the gamer

The idea of what it means to be a gamer, and the overall concept of consumer identity within the GameSpot community was another key theme. In the analyzed forum threads, sharing and describing member tastes in gaming and preferred consumption experiences was commonplace and a large aspect of many discussions. The use of this deliberate and controlled explaining as a method of defining and developing an image of themselves as a gamer and consumer, or the kind of consumer they actually were and how they fit into the community was particularly visible in some discussions. Threads existed with the explicit purpose of discussing and comparing personal tastes in video game brands, genres or specific branded products, and how the consumption of these affected the member’s own sense of self as a gamer.

What appeared noticeable was the usage of identity work by community members in the creation and development of their identity as a gamer. When discussing brands, game design, or video gaming consumption experiences, statements that communicated personal consumption tastes and identity as

a consumer were commonplace. The exchange of such information was so regular that in some circumstances it could be seen as general extra information to help add body and contextual detail to discussions, while in other cases also forming the crux of a dialogue or answer to a question. Consumer identity work therefore served to drive and enrich forum communication, while at the same time building the individual's own sense of self and place within the community.

"I care about having fun in games. That's why I play them. So no, I rarely play on hard difficulties. Dying is an immersion breaker for me, and dying over and over is flat out infuriating."

– gamerguru100, posted on thread 'Do you always play games on the hardest setting?', posted on 19/05/2015

"Back when I was obsessed with 100%'ing every game I'd play in the hardest mode (or hardest mode available until I unlocked the harder ones). Nowadays, with more games than time I just say screw achievements and collectibles and just play through in normal, and more often than not uninstall the game as soon as I'm done with it; I only ever replay a game if I really enjoyed it. If I'm playing mostly for the story and narrative and don't really care about the gameplay I'll even set it to easy just to get past the bad gameplay faster."

– Korvus, GameSpot Moderator, posted on thread 'Do you always play games on the hardest setting?', posted on 20/05/2015

The two quotes above demonstrate how forum discussions contained personal reflection on the community member's own tastes and motivations with regards to consumption activities. Personal experiences and consumption motivations were directly referenced when discussing wider issues related to video gaming brands as well as preferences in consumption. This was occasionally visible through direct language when discussing some aspects of gaming. An example of this was a member using the term "this is why I play games" at the end of a paragraph. Such personal description was often used nonchalantly, like a casual passing remark, and highlighted the ongoing and freely conducted nature of the community member's identity construction.

The GameSpot community acted for many as a means of supporting their own personal interests in gaming as a consumption activity, especially in times of dissatisfaction or disillusionment with video gaming itself. For some members, this included comparing their own experiences and personal history in the consumption activity of video gaming with that of others in the community. Ideological questions

in the style of “what does it mean to be a gamer?” or “why do we play video games?” seemed to be implicit in many discussions, particularly those in which their own changing tastes or overall identity as a consumer of video games required personal re-evaluation. These kinds of discussions revealed introspective styles of identity work as individuals attempted to make sense of their own consumption habits and motivations. Such discussions showed the openness of community members in allowing their personal meanings behind video gaming as a consumption activity to be influenced by others, and with high anonymity given the environment. Furthermore, the readiness with which members took part in this back and forth, constructive discourse displayed how it was likely to some degree a cathartic experience for those involved.

“I wasn't sure which was the right forum to post it on, so if this need to be move let me know. I'm 28 and I have been gaming since I was five and I realized for a past couple of years my interest in gaming has been going downhill fast. I always have this feeling that as soon as I find something else to do with my life, I'll probably won't play video games anymore. The last game I can say truly got me hooked was gta v (ps3) and before that it was skyrim.

Gaming used to be a big part of my life, now I struggle to play for an hour. Even games that excite me does it only for the length of the trailer and nothing more. Not playing games left a big void in my life and it feels like I'm holding in to nostalgia instead of letting go. I saw myself playing games till I die, now I don't even think I might get mgs5 which I'm a huge fan of.

Anybody starting or is feeling the same?”

– da_illest101, posted on thread ‘Anybody else losing appeal in gaming?’, posted on 23/05/2015

In the quote above, community member da_illest101 expresses his or her current dissatisfaction in video gaming as a consumption activity, and shares his or her situation and implicit concerns with other members of the community. This user is making an appeal to other community members with similar experiences – those who are faced with similarly difficult identity work or are struggling with determining how their gaming consumption and identity fits into their broader sense of self. Posts such as the one above highlight one of the apparent benefits of a community like GameSpot to an individual consumer; namely the support for the challenges in aligning the consumer’s identity of self with the rest of their life. The discussion boards of GameSpot presented an environment where many community members together actively and explicitly partook in the development of the community’s understanding

of gaming as a consumption activity, as well as the meanings behind it. In this way, community members could be seen as influencing the identity work of each other quite directly.

“[To those that get burned out from gaming] And wonder where their previous love and drive for gaming went, I can definitively say that I have been there.

What I usually do is not game for days, weeks, and at times (I know) months. But I've always found that I get back to gaming, even after long droughts without gaming.

I'm almost 33 btw, so I've got some experience with me.”

– outworld222, posted on thread ‘To those that usually get burned out from gaming...’, posted on 21/02/2015

In contrast, the quote above is an example of how humor was used in sharing consumption experiences and stress involved with the consumption activity. In the thread from the quote above, members discuss the issue of gaming burnout and how to address it. There is implicit worry of how to reconcile their existing identity as gamers who are exhausted, stressed or losing interest in the video gaming consumption experience.

“To answer your question I think all of us have felt that at one point or another...you grow up, things change, priorities change, tastes change and the amount of time you have available for gaming definitely changes. That being said it's most likely just a phase...when it happens to me I just stop gaming altogether for a month or two so that it feels fresh when I come back. Actually I might need a break right now...I find myself gaming not because I enjoy it but because I'm bored at night and don't want to go to bed (I hate sleeping) so in the end I'm not even focused on the games, just play them in auto-pilot and don't even enjoy them all that much.”

– Korvus, GameSpot Moderator, posted on thread ‘Anybody else losing appeal in gaming?’, posted on 23/05/2015

The sharing of gaming experiences with other members, and the concept of what being a gamer meant to the consumer, often became interwoven with each other and became an ongoing element of activity within the community. In the quote above, community member and moderator Korvus provides personal perspective and advice on the issue of losing interest in the video gaming consumption activity. While sharing his or her personal thoughts and understanding of what it means to be a gamer in the long-term, Korvus also actively undertakes identity work and openly identifies some of the consumption

aspects that have created his or her own gaming identity. The quote is an example of the ways that community members summarized their consumption experiences in their own words, while identifying some of what being a gamer meant to themselves. This example demonstrates the way consumer identity work often manifested in the GameSpot community as part of gaming discussions.

6.3 Theme Two: Brand comparisons and brand adoption

The next theme identified was the influence of multiple brands among community members, particularly in discussions where branded products were compared and contrasted. Proponents of a brand or product had a noticeable influence on those other users who already displayed an interest or curiosity in that particular brand or product. Actual peer mediated brand adoption mostly occurred through recommendations and forming or presenting gameplay associations between brands that were already liked by inquisitive members. Community members were often more likely to adopt a product if it shared some product attributes with, or was otherwise similar to, another competing product that a consumer enjoyed. These similarities appeared overall to boil down to product positioning, brand image, and product design. The closer two products appeared to be to each other in gameplay and brand aspects, the more likely a member was to consider adopting the competing product. For example, if a community member enjoyed the consumption of game A, and he or she appeared to be more likely and willing to purchase and enjoy the consumption of a competitor's game B if that game had high similarity to game A. Therefore, the stronger or better liked a product was, the more likely a consumer was to also adopt a similar product from a competing brand.

“Just having a similar atmosphere, and being open-world is enough for me to enjoy the game even though I don't normally like closed off zombie games or the horror genre in general.”

– Zen_Light, posted in thread ‘Are you enjoying Dying Light?’, 04/02/2015

In the above quote we can see an example of the product similarity mediated brand adoption as mentioned. Community member “Zen_Light” remarks on his distaste for the horror genre, yet several distinct video game product attributes have successfully driven him to brand adoption. In this example the positive product elements were evidently enough to overcome the consumer's dislike of certain attributes which he or she has applied to a category of branded video game products. It is not clear if

this new single consumption experience has altered this community member's perception towards those video game product attributes mentioned in the quote.

Oppositional loyalty therefore did not really apply in many cases; in fact it worked almost in an opposite fashion. Members were even willing to accept product attributes that they already knew they would dislike, in hope of acquiring a new game that would provide a consumption experience similar to a previously enjoyed product. Similarly, products that were seen as providing poor consumption experiences discouraged members from adopting other competing products that were alike, out of concern or expectation that the consumption experience would once again be unsatisfying. This by itself does not support the fundamental principles of oppositional loyalty as explained by Thompson and Sinha (2008), as oppositional loyalty did not seem to manifest among consumers exposed to multiple competing brands. However, oppositional loyalty was visible in discussions and arguments over brands and consumption tastes in general. The clearest form of oppositional loyalty witnessed was in disputes over the quality of a given brand or in battles over a brand's reputation within the community. The frequent byproduct of this argumentative community process appeared to be not clear brand adoption, but rather social tension – sometimes community-wide.

However, there were also large discussions on brand and product recommendations, and the adoption of different brands was not seen in a negative light. In addition, community members often encouraged multiple brand adoption to each other, specifically with regard to those branded products that they enjoyed and preferred. The adoption of products from different competing brands appeared to often be positive, providing the brand or product was a suitable fit to an individual's consumption tastes. This also seemed implicitly linked to the construction of the "gamer" consumption identity, with branded products judged exceedingly on their own merits which all in combination help build the image of the gamer to the individual consumer.

"So after discussion with other members of this board, it seemed like it was time to start a thread where we can discuss new releases and post what we plan to buy or what we have bought (maybe include photos if you want). This can also serve as a recommendations if you are looking for something new but are unsure on what.

Each month somebody (probably myself to start with unless there are any volunteers?) will post the new releases for that month in this thread. Just remember to follow the Game Discussion

board rules and be friendly and feel free to chat about what you are buying and what is being released basically (and as I say, if you want to post photos of items you have bought please do so as long as its not breaking any Gamespot rules).

Enjoy!”

– garfield360uk, posted in thread ‘New releases: What Are You Buying/Post your buys’, 31/03/2014

In the above quote, community member starts a discussion on what branded products other community members like or have enjoyed. This is an opportunity for community members to share their own preferences and recommend brands and products to one another. The particular thread “New releases: What Are You Buying/Post your buys” from the above quote was an example of how increasing brand awareness and the consumption of products from multiple brands were encouraged throughout the community. It is a popular thread, being “stickied” on the Games Discussion Forum, is seventeen pages long, and has over 700 posts and 56,000 views.

On occasion, a user’s community age also appeared to have an impact on the discussions, including which brands were discussed more often. Insiders were often some of the most active members of the community, developing discussions while also driving viewership to those particular discussions. In this way, they helped define and mediate the culture of the community, both in terms of what types of discussions got the most attention/traffic, and also the type of language and structure of the discussions themselves. Insiders influenced which threads received more views, indicating that other community members were at the very least interested in what the insider had to say. This may have been facilitated and in part driven by some of GameSpot’s forum features, such as the high post count members and their recent posts being particularly easy to follow by the rest of the community. Insiders appeared to have a stronger influence on strengthening the existing opinion of a lower status user who shared the insider’s view, but the insider had seemingly no greater influence on actually changing differing opinions. In effect, the quality of a user’s comment clearly trumped their status level.

6.4 Theme Three: Brand-mediated social tension

Another major theme that was identified among community discussions was that of social tension driven at least partially by differences in brand tastes among members. While most discussions and arguments over were constructive, proponents of brands tended to have long, sometimes intense dialogue on the merits and flaws of their preferred brands and branded products. Those users who strongly disliked a game or brand due to a specific reason or event would sometimes have their complaints marginalized by other users with opposite and less passionate views. While this did not happen the majority of the time, it was noticeable. The quotes below, both from the same forum discussion, serve as an example of a typical exchange and provide insight into some of the structure, atmosphere and style of prevalent brand discourse:

"[...] Why the hell does Sony NOT think about gamers who like multiplayer? It's like assuming everybody is the same and likes the same thing. And if you condone that, YOU ARE A GIGANTIC EGOISTIC JERK. And don't give me this generic reply about [multiplayer] being shoehorned into so many games. Sony has none (or next to none, YOU BARGAINING AND MISSING THE POINT JERK) in their upcoming ones.

As I had sad a year and a half ago here (but as usual with unpopular or novel ideas, my topic was largely ignored), the history repeats itself. No upcoming games by Sony that were shown on E3 have multiplayer or co-op (from what we know) nor are there any dedicated multiplayer-only games from them. [Microsoft Studios] on the other hand features co-op in most of them (bar ReCore) or specifically build some titles for multiplayer (Sea of Thieves) in a way that it's arguably guaranteed not to harm the single player experience. I can't see any of those games suffering in quality b/c of co-op inclusion.

What's the justification here? Why is ignoring players' needs acceptable? Why can't they TRY to include co-op in AT LEAST ONE game?"

– Salt_The_Fries, posted in thread 'Why doesn't Sony think about players who like co-op and multiplayer?', 24/06/2016

"@Salt_The_Fries: Because then they would be catering to you and your ilk and getting their ass kicked worldwide in sales. Should Sony follow your set out plan for them? Besides, they actually do have MP games (TLOU is an incredibly MP experience, not that you'd know as it's on PS), but you simply aren't looking at them. Also, and most importantly:

@Slashkice said:

Sony not forcing their devs to include multiplayer for the sake of it is a good thing. Developers should make their games as they envision them."

– SolidTy, posted in thread 'Why doesn't Sony think about players who like co-op and multiplayer?', in reply to Salt_The Fries' parent comment above, 24/06/2016

Throughout the arguments and discussions however, attempts at minimizing or invalidating differing views were occasionally a driving force behind increased social tension. Users with strong feelings towards a brand but who were in the minority in a discussion, tended to be mildly mocked by other members. Negative aspects or faults with a branded product were sometimes also exaggerated for argumentative effect, or as a way of presenting a point. Though these discourse forms were often done in a humorous or joking fashion, it was also used by some members as a form of mild insult, overtly enough to be sometimes taken seriously. Users who clearly spoke with a more emotional or passionate tone were sometimes told "not to take things so seriously", or to "relax, it's just a game", or similar. On some occasions, users with a less popular opinion were told by other members that they "didn't belong in the community" or that they "shouldn't be playing games if they felt that strongly". If a discussion went on for long enough, ad hominem attacks would sometimes become used, despite (and occasionally even because of) the depth and detail of others' arguments. If a member's dissenting opinions towards a liked brand couldn't be changed, then that member may have been ridiculed for their opinions. Other users with a strong preference of the brand would occasionally attempt to emotionally isolate the member, regardless of the inclusion of comments from far more senior members.

The quotes below serve as examples of the above discourse elements and provide some perspective into the nature of the more volatile commentary, including language used and some of the attitudes towards community members with different brand and consumption preferences:

"I played the Witcher 2 with mouse and keyboard and I didn't have any problems. Kids these days should stop complaining about everything."

– johnd13, posted in thread 'On the fence for Witcher 3', 08/04/2015

"PC version [of the game] has even an additional puzzle mini game. This is a game for true intellectuals. Monkey brains of console gamers won't be able to handle it)) Probably the [developer] will include a banana into the collector edition as an incentive))"

– jhonMalcovich, posted in thread ‘X-Com 2 Coming to Consoles in September’, 07/06/2016

It should be emphasized here that such language and manner of discourse was not encouraged by the community on the whole, as it seemed to go against the cultural ideals promoted by moderators and long-standing members. Moderators had a large role in promoting discussion seen as productive or constructive by the community, according to the community’s culture, norms and myths (generally outlined in top “stickied” threads on each forum). Moderators encouraged and supported a community culture that was seen as productive, which included among other things the sharing of consumption experiences, the enhancement of the community’s understanding of brands, and positive member engagement. More senior members, as well as those members with a closer connection to the community’s culture (regardless of seniority), implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) recognized the destructive effect that marginalization of brand consumption experiences often had on community engagement and togetherness. Discussions that were mostly hostile and that were not seen as productive were locked. The majority of discussions that turned into flame wars were locked by moderators, and members who frequently broke the forum rules were banned. In many ways, moderators and to a lesser degree active long-term members were therefore the drivers and overseers of the GameSpot community culture on a broad level, though the word “overseers” is probably too oppressive of a term.

The social tension created by intense arguments over brands and associated products clearly had an effect on the community as a whole, and may have even contributed to a sense of increased restlessness in the community’s social atmosphere. Though uncommon, some threads (even based on their titles alone) pointed to discussions of a more argumentative or accusatory nature that may have influenced the culture of the community into a direction where brand disagreements between members might be more expected. Social tension and brand discussion were also not driven equally by all members. Different community members discussed brands, and to different extents, which is not surprising. Some members seemed to carve themselves a niche in discourse topics, favoring certain discussions over others, though whether this was a conscious action or simply a consequence of particular tastes was often not entirely clear.

6.4.1 The System Wars forum

As mentioned prior in this research paper, the GameSpot community website had multiple sub-forums that collectively made up the entire forum community. One particular sub-forum on the GameSpot website highlighted the specific nature of social tension and brand discussion within the community, and in particular its place within the community's overall culture. This was a forum that was built with the direct purpose of discussing, contrasting and comparing video game brands and branded products. This included discussions on video game platforms, such as consoles (Playstation and Xbox) and computers.

It was obvious, however, that the forum community emphasized constructive and productive discussion. This was arguably its entire purpose, in fact – it was far closer to a platform for passionate yet moderated debate than a pit to which arguments were consigned to fester. Clear rules regarding code of conduct and other forum behavior were outlined, and new community members were frequently encouraged to familiarize themselves with these rules. Redundant topics, spamming, and lewd behavior were strongly discouraged. The forums even implemented a member reputation system called the “Karma System”, where members could accumulate karma points, and potentially be banned. This reputation system was monitored closely by moderators, and served as an example of the System Wars community's (and by extension the entire GameSpot community's) cultural ideals, goals and the mediation of the community's atmosphere. A major thread called “System Wars Survival Guide” outlined not only the community's cultural standards of behavior, but also described some of the cultural terminology of the community. This included explanations of so called “Fanboy Nicknames”; shorthand terms for those members with specific brand loyalties. Another cultural term defined in detail was that of “hype”. Though this word is common enough in the English language to be familiar to most speakers, it had a role in enough discussions and debates within the System Wars forum community that it had been given special contextualized meaning, as well as a scaling system to define so called “levels of hype”.

In some ways the System Wars forum could be considered a sub-community of GameSpot; a “community within a community”. It introduced its own terminology and codes of conduct tweaked from those governing the rest of the greater community, and discourse was flavored into its own form and direction by the permeating subculture. This culture was not divorced from the rest of the greater

community, but was rather an element of the greater culture given its own specific space and allowed to become somewhat deepened.

7. Discussion

This section of the research approaches the topic of the findings and how they relate to existing theory, and ultimately whether or not the findings can answer either of the research questions. Here, this research paper discusses the outcome of the thesis by categorizing the analyzed findings into two main discussion points. These two points each attempt to relate the research findings to existing theoretical research by answering the research questions. Specific theoretical and managerial implications are however presented more fully in the next section, and not here.

7.1 Oppositional loyalty affecting community brand preferences

The main influence that oppositional loyalty appeared to have had within the GameSpot community is that of a driving force behind social tension and brand conflicts on a broad community-wide level. As prior research has shown (Mahajan et al, 1995; Rogers 2003; Gatignon and Robertson, 1985), word of mouth within communities is a strong influencer of product adoption. Oppositional loyalty has similarly been shown in prior research as a possible consequence of consumer interaction within such communities (Muniz and O'Guinn, 2001), especially in online environments where multiple competing brands are concerned (Thompson and Sinha, 2008), and can often lead to strong brand loyalty. The existence and nature of the brand related conflicts within the GameSpot community, and the brand adoption that was stimulated by such brand discourse, supports existing research on word of mouth and oppositional loyalty within brand communities.

Prior research on oppositional loyalty and brand loyalty has identified the proactive defense and direct promotion of a preferred brand, and this was indeed observed throughout multiple discussions (Muniz and Hamer, 2001; Thompson and Sinha, 2008). This research therefore points to the existence of situations where oppositional loyalty has little direct impact on rival brand adoption, instead being observed when the consumer's personal image of their preferred brand (and perhaps as an extension, their social identity as a consumer) was under threat from other members of the brand community. The brand discussions and conflicts within the community led to members promoting their own preferred brands, while simultaneously becoming more open and receptive to rival brands that exhibited similarities to those preferred brands. This duality seemed almost paradoxical, but logically sound

considering the structure and flow of the discussions within the community, and the GameSpot culture that encouraged constructive brand criticism and sharing of consumption experiences.

The majority of brand loyalty related conflicts and social tension within the GameSpot community occurred, perhaps unsurprisingly, in the System Wars sub-forum. The existence of this sub-forum as an area within the community specifically for brand discussion and comparison points to brand tensions being an accepted aspect of the GameSpot community culture, if not explicitly then at least implicitly. Oppositional loyalty could therefore be seen as having a substantial influence on the development of the GameSpot online community culture. The downplaying, marginalizing or occasional ridiculing of community members with differing opinions may show oppositional loyalty influencing tactics of community rejection and/or competition, even if the whole community didn't feel that way at all, or if the bullied user might be more senior or a stronger cultural fit on the whole. Such marginalization behavior, while generally mischievous and teasing, may point to oppositional loyalty as a factor in supporting and further driving social tension, and the fracturing of a brand community involving multiple rival brands. Muniz and Hamer (2001) mention similar behavior and rivalries among consumers with opposing brand loyalties, writing *"[...] consumers express their opposition to these competing brands by initiating and participating in playful rivalries with consumers loyal to competing brands. These behaviors included insulting the competing brand and its consumers and challenging consumers of the other brand to defend their choice."*

Oppositional loyalty may have therefore acted on some level as a disruptive force within the GameSpot community – as opposed to a strictly constructive one – and may have influenced brand loyalties more on a general macro-community level than on a strictly case-by-case basis. In other words, oppositional loyalty was seen overall as affecting levels of brand discussion and community cohesion on a broader level, with singular cases of brand switching directly due to oppositional loyalty-related factors less common. This observation is supported by Thompson and Sinha (2008), who noted oppositional loyalty as affecting consumer brand tastes throughout the community. Schau (2002) identifies tensions between individual community member's own senses of self and the process of gaining membership within an online brand community. However, what was seen in the GameSpot community discussions and activities was that of a more community-wide level of tension regarding brand preferences and perspectives on gaming. Even terms like "hype" had cultural baggage and controversy attached, indicating a more general meta-level of tensions. This observation of broad brand tensions being more visible than individual tensions could have been due to the GameSpot community's

culture being clear in advocating openness in the communication of individual gaming tastes, as well as the inclusiveness of all types of gaming.

It is important to emphasize that the social tension that developed from brand discussions wasn't always negative, nor did it have an entirely destructive effect on the community's culture. It can in fact be argued that the brand conflicts which were observed stimulated creative discussion and brand adoption among community members, and the atmosphere of a closer community where thoughts and experiences regarding branded products were shared candidly and honestly. These discussions ultimately served to build the GameSpot community culture into its contemporary form. The existence of the System Wars Forum demonstrates the extent to which the community, its insiders, and its cultural leaders have embraced discussion and conflict over brands and consumption practices, mediated by elements of oppositional loyalty. Brand related conflicts and discussion has therefore potentially been seen as an unavoidable yet constructive aspect of multiple brand loyalty manifesting and clashing within a single community of video gaming consumers. The result is a community that has, overall, a wide perspective of the different types of video gaming tastes among consumers, a more inclusive culture, and as a result provides a potentially richer community experience. Such brand conflicts have in all likelihood strengthened the community as a whole – for almost any video gamer, there is probably a part of GameSpot that caters to their interests and tastes in gaming.

While this research has shown direct examples of oppositional loyalty with regards to brand defense and promotion among community members, it was also shown the influence of oppositional loyalty on brand adoption between rival brands. As mentioned, the brand related discussions and conflicts lead to a large amount of brand promotion and comparison between community members. These comparisons were in practice done on many levels of product judgment and criticism, and may have provided a consumer with a more situational, more personal, more nuanced and more varied insight into a potential brand or product than what might be gleaned purely from a series of product reviews. Thompson and Sinha (2008) suggest that overlapping memberships in brand communities may increase the possibility of rival brand adoption, and this thesis supports that claim. Furthermore, this thesis provides insight into this phenomenon by detailing the impact of brand and product attribute similarities triggering such brand adoption. This research also supports Thompson and Sinha's (2008) arguments for managerial implications, especially with regards to the advantages inherent in oppositional loyalty being weakened within overlapping communities.

7.2 Gamer identity and influence in discussion

There was reason to believe that brand conflict related discussion and the wider GameSpot community culture had a substantial impact on identity work done by community members, and ultimately on their long-term consumption practices. Sharing and describing their tastes and preferences in gaming and the associated consumption experiences may have partially been used as a form of online social identity construction (Ahuvia, 2005; Snow and Anderson, 1987). The sharing of such details might be an example of an attempt at demonstrating an intimate understanding and expertise of a consumption experience specific to the brand community. In this way, the user may be working towards increasing his or her subcultural capital and clout within the community. This is relevant as Arsel and Thompson (2011) identify a strong understanding of culturally specific consumer products as one way that cultural capital within a community is built.

The construction of the “video gaming reality” was an ongoing process mediated by community discussion and interaction. Throughout the community activity it became apparent that members utilized brand discussion as a way of gaining perspective on their own experiences as a gamer, and in this way developed an inner identity of what being a gamer and consumer of video gaming products personally meant to themselves. Prior research, as noted by Schau (2002), has observed consumer identity development by members within an online brand community, and this seems to have also actively taken place by members of the GameSpot community. By communicating their own expectations and reactions to specific elements of the video gaming consumption experience, community members built narratives of themselves as gamers. The broader, less niche type of gaming culture that GameSpot projected may have also encouraged greater identity development among members. Ultimately the identity construction and personal narrative of a gamer and consumer evolved into an identity of self within the GameSpot online community. The identity of self that was developed over time by the individual perhaps served as a way of connecting their own gaming experiences with the community culture of GameSpot, and also develop a more coherent sense of self within this environment and its tensions. This somewhat echoes Schau (2002) and even Lutgen-Sandvik (2008). As seen by the position that long-time community members had within the community and their role in discussions, such identity development was visibly an accepted part of the GameSpot community culture, though the community likely identified the process as a fundamental part of an individual growing into the community and maturing as a gamer.

Indeed the influence that identity development among members had on the cultural development of the community on the whole could be observed in the influence that long-term members had on discourse mannerisms, community values and the long-term development of the individual sub-forums. As mentioned in the analysis, the creation of the System Wars sub-forum demonstrated the nature and spirit of discourse that was expected and to a degree even encouraged within the community. Throughout, the overseers of cultural development within the community were nevertheless the long-term members – including the moderators. The existence of website tools (presenting those members with the most posts, ease of tracking a popular member's community activity, etc.) reinforced cultural respect and interest towards those members that were the most active, the most ancient, and whose identities within the GameSpot community environment were the most developed and identifiable. These members were without doubt the insiders of the GameSpot community, and this parallels what has been seen in other brand communities. The preference of brand and, more broadly, gaming genres were opportunities to demonstrate knowledge, subcultural capital, and ultimately status through quality of game taste. Bourdieu (1984) and Holt (1998) point to similar occurrences in prior research. Thus a community member's length of membership, activity, gaming tastes, and place within the community may have had an impact on the development of their consumer identity, and ultimately on the consumer identities of other community members due to nature of discussions and brand discourses.

Finally, what was also evident was the use of language as a way of communicating values and aims regarding the community's culture, and ultimately served to influence the identity construction of community members due to the heavily discourse-reliant nature of the community space. Terminology like "Lounge" and "Relax and enjoy" explicitly conveyed specific cultural ideologies and the intended cultural direction regarding parts of the forum (especially when communicated by a moderator), and by extension the community as a whole. Similarly, the name "System Wars" communicated a specific atmosphere and cultural connotations of a sub-forum. As mentioned in the analysis, the importance and cultural meaning given to terms like "hype" served as a way of communicating community-wide values regarding elements of the gaming consumption experience, as well as to a degree the industry overall. This may be seen as a clear way of conveying the nature of the community's culture to potential new members, implicitly signaling one way such newcomers can build subcultural capital and legitimacy (Thornton, 1996). The following of social cues placed by more experienced members higher up the community hierarchy lays the groundwork for guiding the behavior of newcomers. These sorts of reminders of some the community's cultural tenets could be considered particularly important to

community members considering the easily changing nature of online communities, as mentioned by Kozinets (2006).

8. Conclusion and implications

This section presents the research conclusions, as well as implications both theoretical and managerial. Finally, the limitations of the research are identified, and some suggestions for further research are suggested. This thesis started with the goal of looking at oppositional loyalty and subcultural capital in online brand communities. The ethnographic analysis of the GameSpot online brand community revealed information about oppositional loyalty and brand loyalty between multiple brands, but the effects of subcultural capital in this environment were not seen as much, and instead more information on game identity construction was observed. The exposure to multiple brands as well as varying community member hierarchy has been studied, and several theoretical and managerial conclusions have hence been developed.

8.1 Theoretical implications

This research contributes to the understanding of oppositional loyalty and subcultural capital within overlapping online video gaming brand communities by shedding light on these concepts through a qualitative lens and with regards to brand adoption and brand community structure. This study contributes to existing literature by providing evidence of oppositional loyalty influencing consumer sub-groups and brand community structure, and from this perspective, brand adoption both indirectly and holistically. The community-wide tension and brand discourse, partially fueled by oppositional loyalty, can lead to the shaping and morphing of online brand community culture as members form loose sub-communities around their favored brands. This thesis finds evidence that such debate and argument over brands and products can influence a brand community in both positive and negative ways; developing the community's discourse patterns and cultural myths, and consequently leading to brand adoption and shifts in member brand loyalty through submersion within and appropriation of the community's culture. This research provides insight into the concept of community mediated brand discourse influencing brand loyalty on a broader cultural level, and through long-term community participation – as opposed to brand adoption triggered via, for example, singular key discussions or consumption experiences.

Furthermore, this thesis suggests that the discussion of brands and member consumption practices within such a community may encourage consumer identity work among members, which

when combined with the nature of the discourse environment can further promote brand attachment and the development of personal brand meaning. This thesis provides a different perspective regarding tension between personal identity and community membership, by highlighting the broader community-wide brand-related tensions, than those that occur predominantly on the more individual level dealing with personal senses of self (Schau, 2002). This thesis contributes to existing research on online consumer identity work, as well as the study of the link between identity and brands (Hollenbeck and Kaikati, 2012; Kirmani, 2009, p.274) by demonstrating a specific example of identity work occurring within an online environment characterized by a high degree of anonymity and overt tension between brand loyalties. Such an environment with many identity influencers can provide a theoretically insightful perspective of consumer identity work and the challenges faced by its actors.

8.2 Managerial implications

Existing research already indicates the value of brand communities in stimulating and fostering brand loyalty among consumers. This research provides some suggestions on how managers might make better use of online brand communities. Managers may be able to foster brand adoption through communities of another brand that have similar product attributes, and that are preferred or at least appreciated by that community. Managers may in this way develop brand adoption among customers of a different, potentially rival brand, provided the product/brand connection (and by extension, the consumption experience) can be emphasized.

Similarly, managers should emphasize differentiation from disliked brands (and not necessarily only rivals), both in terms of brand image, as well as in the advertised nature of the consumption experience itself. It is important to be aware of the potential for word of mouth within a brand community to quickly and powerfully influence community perceptions of a brand.

8.3 Research limitations

Naturally, this thesis paper has limitations. The context of this study was highly focused in its examination of oppositional loyalty and subcultural capital within the context of online communities. For example, only a single online community was studied. As a result, this research lacks a proper degree

of generalizability. This is a limitation to consider despite generalizability not being a major goal in constructivist research. Of equal importance is that this research is the analytical interpretations of a lone researcher, on a topic of significant complexity featuring several theoretical concepts layered together. The researcher's own background of experiences, prior knowledge, and perspectives on the research topics directed the study, and undoubtedly lead to some degree of biases.

A related limitation includes the researcher's own lack of experience in ethnographic research, which may have led to a less rigorous, efficient and reliable analysis and outcome of the study. A highly experienced researcher may have likely produced a more rigorous and detailed research outcome, with a potentially alternate perspective of the chosen brand community and its culture, leading to perhaps altogether different results. In addition, the GameSpot community was not ethnographically studied equally, as some sub-forums were deemed more relevant to the research than others, and so received more attention. This focus in study area may have led to research outcomes different from those if all GameSpot forums had been examined and analyzed with equal extent.

8.4 Suggestions for future research

This study was highly focused in its context of oppositional loyalty. Future research can examine oppositional loyalty within the context of online communities in new directions. As this research paper along with Thompson and Sinha (2008) study oppositional loyalty within the sphere of online gaming, further research could look at different industries and the brand communities within them. Oppositional loyalty within communities outside of entertainment products is one general direction that could provide a different theoretical perspective. In addition, more attention can be paid towards the relationship between oppositional loyalty and branded products. For example, examining the kind of effect that branded products with an emphasis on utility (as opposed to experiential taste like video games) have on oppositional loyalty within a brand community could help better understand the link between oppositional loyalty and products and services. The actual number of competitive brands that consumers are exposed to could be another focus for future research, particularly the difference between communities with "one vs one" brand loyalty tension and those communities with a "many vs many" atmosphere. In any case, current research on oppositional loyalty remains limited both in context and absolute quantity.

9. References

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